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Mail

Mar 6, 2000

Devices tap into wireless Internet



DIGITAL SURVIVOR

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The ability to tap into the Internet from anywhere at any time is going to be a key feature of the future technology that we will use to work and to play.

That was one overriding theme last week in New Orleans, as the usual assortment of high-technology chief executive officers gathered for Wireless 2000, a conference focused on access to the Internet.

Most estimates suggest this will become a multibillion-dollar industry within a few years, with a flood of new devices and technologies now under study in research labs and soon to be unleashed upon us.

The results of some of those efforts are already apparent: one of the first areas where we are seeing the impact of wireless is in Internet access. Toronto-based Look Communications Inc., for example, provides an alternative method of getting a high-speed Internet connection to your home or office.

After attaching a special receiving antenna on the roof, you can get a high-speed connection that comes through the air (presuming that you aren't in an area with lots of trees or other barriers, which can often make the technology useless).

Several companies in California are testing a high-speed Internet service that provides access via an antenna on the bottom of a plane that floats around in big, lazy circles several kilometres up. Why build a bunch of expensive radio towers when all you need is a few airplanes to send up through the course of a day?

High-speed access is one thing — linking to the Web and to e-mail while travelling is another service that people will demand. Here, we are about to gain a new level of connectivity.

I recently had the opportunity to use Bell Mobility's new Internet cellphone while on the road, and was thrilled to be able to instantly check e-mail upon landing in Vancouver.

There's a fascination that comes from the ability to read the news in the back of a taxi or to furtively look up a stock quote while sitting in a boring meeting.

The wireless Internet will lead to other new technologies.

For a glimpse, do a search of the National Semiconductor site for the WebPad (www.national.com). A device such as that will provide a practical and useful solution for many business applications, such as inventory management within a massive warehouse.

Wireless Internet technology will lead to far stranger devices five years out. The video camera of the future will have a wireless Internet connection built in.

Travel to DisneyWorld, hit the camera's record button, and not only will those precious moments with the kids be saved to tape, but they'll be instantly transmitted via a local radio transponder to your Web site so grandma can tune in.

But consider whether, over time, many of us will demand the widespread and instant connectivity that is offered. The wireless Internet brings us a world that is too connected and too demanding of our time. We will come to value moments when we can tune out.

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